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## Teaching Academic Writing for Advanced Level Grade 10 English

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### Abstract

Teaching academic English writing to high school learners is quite challenging. As a teacher, you need to consider the learners' background, and their knowledge of English with their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers need to adopt research based methods of L2 teaching since research based methods have been successful in helping L2 learners produce writing that is a satisfactory level of linguistic proficiency and mastery of academic writing. Moreover, teachers have to modify their classes according to their learners' various needs. Techniques vary and what works with one learner does not necessarily work for another. Yet, research also reveals that by following certain strategies, academic writing can be acquired more efficiently, particularly when learners have a high level of English proficiency. This study follows the qualitative research method since it is an action research. An essay template was developed for the learners to follow in order to teach them academic writing. The data is composed of the participants' pre- & post essays that were evaluated using the Common Core State Standards Writing Rubric. The participants are the learners of Grade 10-advanced level, at LWIS-CiS, DT. The results reveal that following the designed "essay template" has improved the learners' academic writing and therefore, the researchers recommend using the template.

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## 1. Introduction

Language is the medium through which students learn various concepts and skills, form their identities, and interact socially with others. Language is also the corner stone of the teaching and learning process (Bloom, et al., 2004). Many students in Lebanon speak languages in addition to English. They speak Arabic, their mother tongue, or Arabic and French in case they are French educated. Some speak Armenian as well in case they have an Armenian origin. In various schools where English is the medium of instruction, students learn school subjects in English such as Math and Sciences. In secondary classes, students are requested to use academic language which requires advanced proficiency in complex language across subject areas (Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011). Although students learn English at school for 13 years (K-10), many secondary students still struggle with academic language and academic subjects. The more academic content becomes abstract and complex, the more the language structures become sophisticated and challenging (Bailey, Burkett, & Freeman, 2010).

Academic language, more specifically academic English, can be defined as the language through which school subjects are taught and assessed. It is the language used in school settings aiming at helping learners acquire and use knowledge (DiCerbo et al., 2014). Students need teacher's support in order to engage in tasks across school subjects while focusing on the discourse, lexical, and grammatical components of the academic English language (Schleppegrell, 2009; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

In secondary classes, many students have a negative attitude towards writing in general and writing in the target English language in particular. They do not find the need to follow the writing process and consider the pre-writing techniques a waste of time. One of the reasons could be that classrooms contain students that vary in their level of English proficiency. In this case, teachers find themselves trying to persuade learners repeatedly of the importance of developing their academic writing in the English language. Therefore, teachers need to help students get familiar with the various academic writing styles such as tentative, formal, informal and objective. Such advanced writing styles require that students have a good knowledge of grammar, syntax, spelling, vocabulary, and others. At LWIS-City International School (LWIS-CIS), a K-12 school in Lebanon, which follows the differentiated instructional model, students are divided into classrooms based on their levels of English proficiency. The grade 10 students who took part in this study belong to the advanced level group; that is, they have advanced linguistic abilities as well as a high proficiency in English academic writing. After some resilience to use a commonly essay template (see Appendix I) as a pre-writing technique, they started following the writing process (Munoz-Luna, 2015) and showed improvement in their written products.

### 1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how high schoolers from grade 10 at CIS are showing advancement in their academic writing being themselves highly proficient in the English language. Their improvement was promoted by the use of the essay template, which helped them organize their writing and follow successfully the writing process.

### 1.2. Research question

This study aims at answering the following question: Does the use of a template designed for academic writing improve learners' performance in writing?

## 2. Literature Review

Writing is one of the most complex activities Involving grammar and semantic instruction. According to (Munoz-Luna, 2015), educators have always considered writing difficult to measure, assess, analyze and score. Even in the 21st century, writing is still perceived as a demanding task involving a wide range of skills and subskills (Mazandarani, 2010). Writers normally cannot be consciously aware of all the writing strategies involved when writing in English L2 classes. Therefore, teachers should carefully plan writing strategies that students can

consciously work on their texts from a multiple perspective, which include: grammatical level, lexical level discursive level, metadiscursive level, genre specifications, and content compilation (Lillis & Curry, 2006).

When learners are not familiar with the various writing stages and strategies, it is the teachers' duty to provide them with enough opportunities to practice their writing skill using academic English.

Using writing strategies makes learners more autonomous and self-regulated when writing in English, their second language. Writing strategies are essential for writers to refine their ideas in their academically written productions. The writing strategies in L2 academic writing (Nacera, 2010; Mitchell & Myles, 2004) involve 1. metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, reviewing, evaluating, reporting findings, recognizing essay structures), 2. Cognitive strategies (repetition, organization, summarizing, imagery using, deducing, inference, note writing, paraphrasing), 3. Comprehension strategies (re-reading), and 4. socio-affective strategies (cooperative planning).

Since writing is a cyclical process, writers need to continually revise their scripts and adjust their strategies as needed (Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy, & Marín, 2008). Consequently, students who normally proof-read and revise their writings tend to perform better (Munoz-Luna, 2015).

Academic writing should be focused on the following (as listed in del Olmo, 2015):

- Audience and purpose
- Concise and fluid writing
- Formal vocabulary
- Hedging (the author's awareness of his/her reader besides the presence of the author in the text)
- Nominalizations
- Unambiguous writing
- Writing conventions: abbreviations, acronyms and compound labels
- Grammar and punctuation

Proficient academic writers usually make use of passive forms of the verb, impersonal pronouns and phrases, qualifying words and phrases, complex sentence structures, and specialized vocabulary.

Hedging is one of the main characteristics of academic writing. Being able to use hedges appropriately allows the writer to function in an English speaking academic world. Hedges can also help writers consider their readers as participants in the text (Hyland, 2005). Hedging devices include examples such as the following: instead of saying "I know", academic writers should rather assume or suggest when addressing others. Hence, the importance of hedging devices lie in their ability to help authors to introduce their claims with more caution in order to be more widely accepted by their colleagues and, ultimately enhancing positive interaction and intellectual debate.

In her study, Munoz-Luna (2015) analyzed the essays of 200 Spanish undergraduate students written using academic English. Findings showed that participants who used various writing strategies prior as well as during writing were able to produce complex sentences and more coherent texts. These advanced writers were proficient in the use of complex transitions for coherence and textual cohesions. In addition, they employed commonly used pre-writing strategies that help them plan their piece of writing in addition to outlining, drafting, and proofreading.

It is important to help learners build their confidence in academic writing using English as a medium (AWE). Teachers must work at building their learners' confidence, making them realize that academic writing can be successfully acquired when following systematic prewriting strategies (Panourgia & Zafiri, 2012). The acquisition of AWE is vital for learners' academic success (Baily et al. 2010). Teachers of AWE need to collaborate with educators from other subject areas such as science, math and social studies, in their endeavor to improve their learners' skills (DiCerbo et al., 2014). It is important to note that many learners in Lebanese schools do not know how to write academically and need further training in building their writing skills. A technique for doing so is teaching learners to follow the process approach which can turn them into flexible writer (Silva, 1990 as cited by Caldwell, 2011). Through process writing, teachers can develop invention strategies (Coffin et al., 2003) to assist their learners in becoming proficient writers. From this perspective, the writing template has been developed for the Grade 10-level five learners at LWIS-Cis, DT.

### 3. Methodology

This study aims at investigating the influence of a designed template in improving learners' proficiency in writing. Learners were required to use and follow the template while planning and drafting their essays.

#### 3.1. Design

This study is an action research that aims at assisting the researcher Alameddine in improving and refining her teaching methods. It follows the qualitative method of analyzing the data. The Common Core State Standards Writing Rubric has been used to evaluate the essays (see Appendix II).

#### 3.2. Participants

The learners participating in this study are a convenient sample. They are Alameddine's own Grade 10 learners. They attend LWIS-CiS, DT school in Lebanon. The learners are in 105, which is a high-leveled English class whose learners are very proficient in the English language.

The class is made up of 7 American System (AS) learners who follow the high-school system, where they can acquire a Freshman Certificate in Grade 12. The other 2 learners follow the Lebanese System (LS) where they have to sit for the Baccalaureate in Grade 12 to be eligible for university.

Table 1. Participants

	LS	AS	F	M	EN Av 70-75	EN Av 76-80	EN Av 81-85	EN Av 86-90
# Learners	2	7	8	1	2	2	3	2

	LS	AS	F	M	En Av 70-75	En Av 81-85	En Av 86-90
Learners	2	7	8	1	2	3	2

#### 3.3. Instrument

In this research, a pre- and post-tests in writing were administered. A prompt related to the literature taken in class was given in which the learners had to respond to in a 4-5 paragraph essay. A template was developed for the learners (Refer to Appendix) to follow in order to teach them academic writing. The essays were evaluated following the Common Core State Standards Writing Rubric devised by the English Professional Learning Council (EPLC) and Turnitin (2012) (see Appendix II).

#### 3.4. Procedure & Data Collection

The school year started on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The participants had come from Grade 9 the previous year, with no academic writing background. The first diagnostic writing test was administered in the beginning of October 2015. During the months of November and December, two writing tests were given, whose prompts were related to the literature the participants had covered in class. The basic components of writing were given in class. Lessons on how to write a focused thesis, a good introduction and conclusion, and good support and development of thesis were covered. These writing tests were considered as pre-tests.

In term 2, which started mid-December, a writing template was developed and introduced to the participants. Learners were required to follow it in their writing. Participants sat for three writing tests in term 2: one December 18, 2015, one January 20, 2016 and the last one February 10<sup>th</sup>.

#### 4. Results & Analysis

After each writing test, grades were recorded for data collection. Later, tables were constructed on Excel and means of the pre- and post-tests were calculated.

Table 2. Pre/Post Tests Means

	Pre-test	Post-test
Av. Means	70/100	75/100

	Pre-test	Post-test
Av. Means	70/100	75/100

As Table 2 discloses, the mean of the Pre-test was 70/100 while the Post-test 75/100, revealing a 5 point increase. The result concurs with the literature. The template had given the learners a framework to refine and organize their ideas to produce a well-written response (Nacera, 2010). By following the template, which served as a pre- and during writing strategies, the learners were able to develop more complex and coherent essays (Munoz-Luna, 2015). Moreover, the template had turned the participants into autonomous writers who are confident of their writing. When realizing that by following systematic prewriting strategies would lead them to improved essay products (Panouragia & Zaifiri, 2012) learners endorsed the template as a writing strategy.

The template's 'success' in improving the learners' academic writing was also reflected in the learners' performance in social studies, particularly History (DiCerbo et al., 2014). In an informal meeting with Grade 10 Social Studies teacher, she commented that the learners' responses have become more focused, well organized and their explanations supported by evidence.

The samples writing below, which were written by the same learner, reveals the extent of improvement in the learner's writing. **Sample 1** was written in Term 1 while **Sample 2** in Term 2.

##### Sample 1

Prompt: *how do poetic elements & structures contribute to meaning and appreciation? How are literary devices used to enhance poetry & its meaning? Discuss.*

Writing a poem is a pastime that is not genuine if missing a certain true feeling or attitude. (1) Writing is the music that comes out of the poet's heart. It is the music of paper. There are certain instruments used to play music well, (2) the same exists in writing. In order to convey a message in a beautiful way that does not undermine the value of the thought, one must use the right tools for the job. These tools are literary devices and poetic elements. (3)

##### Sample 2

Prompt: *describe the comic elements of the Bear.*

Ever since the time of Greek mythologies, farce has been putting that 'special spice', as many writers say, in literary works. Found in several plays, movies and books of today, farce not only brings the audience a sense of hilarity from absurd comments but also relieves them from stress and anger- as stress TV says (note 1). When speaking of farce, one cannot go about the conversation properly without recalling one of Russia's famous plays *The Brute* by Anton Chekov for farce is the basis of it (note 2). In such a play, although seen absurd, there is an extravagant amount of sarcasm and whimsical dialogues that make *The Brute* engage the audience comically (note 3)

In Sample 1: In this introduction the learners did not include a transition between the first sentence and the second to connect the ideas together (note 1). Although the learner/participant started with a general idea about the topic, she did not link it to the prompt and narrow the idea to relate it to the prompt. In note 2, the learner committed a language/mechanic error, which is considered as a basic mistake in their advanced level. Finally, the last sentence (note 3), which is supposed to be the thesis, lacks the two basic conditions for it to be considered as one: first, it did not address the prompt and thus is out-of-topic; and second, it lacked focus. In level 5, learners are required to develop a focused thesis statement, one that not just introduces the topic and the author's position, but also the structure and the sub-topics the essay will discuss and analyze. In short, sample 1 lacks all the requirements of a good introduction as presented in the template.

In Sample 2: The first two sentences serve as the introduction of the paragraph. They present a general idea on the subject and serve as a 'hook' for the readers. The third sentence serves as the link between the general idea and the prompt (note 2). Finally, the last sentence in the paragraph (note 3) serves as a well-structured and focused thesis. It introduced the author's claim/position and stated the structure of the essay. In short, the paragraph follows the template to the last step.

## 5. Limitations

Three major limitations are present in this current study. First, the learners are a convenient sample chosen by the researcher. They are high achievers in an advanced level of English proficiency. Finally, the class is small in number, only nine learners. Many obstacles can be overcome when classes are small in number, so improving in writing could have been achieved without the use of the template.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The learners' writing skills improved in a short period of time. The researchers recommend implementing the designed template since it turned the participants into autonomous learners and gave them confidence in writing. Moreover, it improved their performance in other subject matter that required academic writing, especially social studies. The template showed improvement in very short time, therefore can serve as a 'short cut' for learners who do not have time to master the techniques and requirements of academic writing.

## Appendix A. Essay Template

Part	Structure	Information
Introduction	General Information on topic	
	Linking topic to prompt	
	Thesis statement ( focused into topic + at least 2 sub proofs )	
Body Paragraph 1	Topic Sentence	
	Supporting details of 1	
	Example 1	
	Supporting details of 2	
	Example 2	
Body Paragraph 2	Conclusion	
	Topic Sentence	
	Supporting details 1	
	Example 1	
	Supporting details 2	
Conclusion	Example 2	
	Conclusion	
	Re-introduces thesis	
Conclusion	Summarizes argument	
	Expresses attitude	

**Appendix B. Common Core State Standards Writing Rubric**

ARGUMENT (9-10)					
Description	5 Exceptional	4 Skilled	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Inadequate
<b>Claim:</b> The text introduces a clear, arguable claim that can be supported by reasons and evidence.	The text introduces a compelling claim that is clearly arguable and takes a purposeful position on an issue. The text has a structure and	The text introduces a precise claim that is clearly arguable and takes an identifiable position on an issue. The text has an effective structure	The text introduces a claim that is arguable and takes a position. The text has a structure and organization that	The text contains an unclear or emerging claim that suggests a vague position. The text attempts a structure and	The text contains an unidentifiable claim or vague position. The text has limited structure and organization.
<b>Development:</b> The text provides sufficient data and evidence to back up the claim as well as a conclusion that	The text provides convincing and relevant data and evidence to back up the claim and effectively addresses	The text provides sufficient and relevant data and evidence to back up the claim and addresses	The text provides sufficient data and evidence to back up the claim and addresses counterclaims.	The text provides data and evidence that attempts to back up the claim and unclearly addresses	The text contains limited data and evidence related to the claim and counterclaims or lacks counter-
<b>Audience:</b> The text anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns about the claim. The text	The text consistently addresses the audience's knowledge level and concerns about the claim. The text	The text anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns about the claim. The text addresses the specific	The text considers the audience's knowledge level and concerns about the claim. The text addresses	The text illustrates an inconsistent awareness of the audience's knowledge level and needs.	The text lacks an awareness of the audience's knowledge level and needs.
<b>Cohesion:</b> The text uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, creates cohesion, and clarifies the relationships	The text strategically uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text explains the relationships between the claim	The text skillfully uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text identifies the relationship between the claim and reasons	The text uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text connects the claim and reasons. The text links the	The text contains limited words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text attempts to connect the claim	The text contains few, if any, words, phrases and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text does not connect the claims and reasons.
<b>Style and Conventions:</b> The text presents a formal, objective tone that demonstrates standard English conventions of	The text presents an engaging, formal and objective tone. The text intentionally uses standard English conventions of usage and mechanics with	The text presents an appropriate and formal, objective tone. The text demonstrates standard English conventions of usage and mechanics with	The text presents a formal, objective tone. The text demonstrates standard English conventions of usage and mechanics with	The text illustrates a limited awareness of formal tone. The text demonstrates some accuracy in standard English conventions of	The text illustrates a limited awareness or inconsistent tone. The text illustrates inaccuracy in standard English conventions of



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